

# We are all Citizens of Coronaville: Psychological Reflections on Coronavirus in Italy

Interview with psychotherapist Francesca N. Vasta who helped us to better understand how and how much the isolation dictated by the health emergency is changing (or has already changed) our lives: here are her tips.

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**The Coronavirus emergency is straining the psychological state of the Italians called to drastically change their lifestyle habits in a very brief timeframe. What does all this distortion entail for our emotional aspect?**

I can answer by making a parallel with what has happened and what is happening now. It is as if we all had found ourselves in a new and unknown reality, in a "spatial-temporal" place that I would call Coronaville. Because as the great thinker Zygmunt Bauman teaches us, giving a name to things, is important not only as a technical data but it helps us to represent a cultural and intellectual process.

China seemed distant, what they were living there touched us from afar. We were not ready to see the signs that have led to this reality since we did not have in our anthropological heritage - personal and collective - a symbolic code which is necessary to comprehend the extent of what was going on. The Italian Coronaville is facing a challenge to understand a reality which was previously unknown to us, but today obliges us to reconsider and enhance values such as: solidarity, civil commitment, respect for the rules, altruism. We could try to imagine the psychic response of defence of the population in front of the invisible enemy, the virus, placing them on a Gaussian curve: on one extreme the "denial", a part of individuals who are not able to accept this new reality and interprets it as a false alarm, as it is something that can only happen to some, but not to them. Denial is a primitive mechanism of defence present since childhood and corresponds to the need of eliminating unconsciously an unpleasant reality. In the actuality, however, this mechanism has powerful implications not only on a personal level but also on a social level because it exposes others to the serious risk that the individual who carries it out is taking.

At the other end of the curve we find an opposite psychic functioning, the hyper control: the obsessive search for information in order to be prepared for everything, the spasmodic run-up to the massive purchase of multiple goods at the same time, for example: food, the "now extremely rare" facemasks, vitamins, especially those considered immunostimulant, etc.; as well as, the phobic enclosure for which it is not even possible to look out of the window for fear of infection. Optimistically, I hope that the majority of the population which is using common sense, who follows the indications that are given by the government and civil protection, who respects the rules, who goes out only to buy the basic necessities and who relies on official sources of information, lies between these two extremes. This last point is not to be overlooked in a "hyper-informed" culture like ours, just think that the National Board of Psychologists has expressed it well in its "CORONAVIRUS Psychological Vademecum for citizens".

Furthermore, exactly trying to place the reflections in a useful way with respect to our social and anthropological context, I consider important to think about our relationship with time. Right now, those who are projected into the past regretting the things they have given up are more exposed to discouragement and sadness; on the other hand, those who project themselves only into the future, risk to experience disappointment and anxiety. In fact, we know that we must understand how to wait, tolerate frustration, be cautious and see how things will evolve. Therefore, in Coronaville who lives in the present moment is and will be all right. Eastern philosophies tell us that the present moment is the only moment that really exists. Living the

present moment in its fullness means being aware of what we are feeling in the here and now, we can afford to be sad, worried and bored in the present. This does not mean that we have to stop organizing and best managing our daily life. One thing is certain, time goes by and it's up to us not to waste it.

**“Do not leave your home unless it is extremely necessary” is the obligation that everyone is called to respect: how do you live isolation in the best way? I mainly think of the people who live alone, of the people who are more used to going out to look for company and social situations and those people which now, from day to day, find themselves unable to share anything.**

Just like that: we have to limit our outgoes to the essential. We are all citizens of Coronaville in this moment, and as such we have obligations and we must comply with the indications provided by the government and respect them. Regarding living the condition of isolation, I do not believe that it is possible to provide a general recipe, it is necessary to remember how each person has his own way of reacting to adversity. I think that each of us must focus and make the best use of his own resources to face this moment.

In the spaces of our homes, **on an individual level**, we have the possibility of being able to do things for ourselves, the things we always say that we cannot do because of lack of time. Let's try to use digital devices to connect and cultivate relationships even at a distance. Let's spend a specific amount of time for this purpose. Life in Coronaville is already teaching us how important words are: the affection and closeness that is passed through words. Written words and spoken words, if sincerely authentic, are the real relief for those who live in an isolated condition. The words that Papa Francesco said about the value of the small concrete gestures that we can rediscover in this moment and that can make us a community are very beautiful: a caress, a hug and where this is not possible due to the distance, you must do it virtually even through a phone call. **On a social level**, referring to the critical moment we are experiencing we must remember that the term crisis of Greek derivation (κρίσις) is also translated as "choice" and "capacity for judgment": we should, therefore, try to live this moment as the possibility of being part of a social chorus that works for the common good. I want to remember that we are humans and we are biologically predisposed to cooperate. Inborn human motivations exist, the scholar Giovanni Liotti has suggested among the Interpersonal Motivational Systems the cooperative one. It is an "inborn need" for a cooperation between equals with a view to reach a common goal, this system requires "interpersonal" activation, as it expresses that basic human need of "being with the others" in an equal and cooperative position, neither of dependence nor of command, characterized by the sharing of the intents and the co-responsibility of the actions.

**The closure of the schools has inevitably led the children to adapt to the exceptional nature of the situation: how can we explain them what is happening without transmitting them our anxieties and fears? How do they live their everyday life at home?**

Children are exceptional and have significant creative resources. Of course, I find it very difficult to generalize, I will try. The rule should be: sincerity. Certainly, however, communication must be tuned to the development of the child and his ability to metabolize information. Paraphrasing a famous psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott who claimed that there is no child without a mother, we are not talking about children but about children in their family environment. At the level of emotional experience, a lot depends on how families are experiencing this moment and what mood is experienced. Parents should be reminded that it is a great opportunity to **have time to share with their children**. Let's try to make the best use of it, also aware of the effort that this commitment involves. There is another side of the coin that should not be forgotten. Parents who find themselves having to work from home with elementary school children and secondary school children, especially those with children of different ages, find themselves having to manage distant learning: online homework, platforms, lessons, and I think that all this load together can generate frustration. Therefore, you have to go as far as you can trying to avoid too much stress.

**Older people are counted among the people most at risk from Coronavirus infection. We imagine that they are among the categories that are most vulnerable to the fears of the moment which, however, except for telephone contacts or video calls, cannot be expressed and received by family members who may live far away as it would normally be at any other time. How can we reassure them?**

Those who have relatives, friends, distant elderly parents, who at the moment are confined at home and cannot even go out to shop, can do a lot. They can make their presence felt in many ways. The problem perhaps is that many of us are not "literate" to emotional support, I intend the kind of closeness that does not coincide with offering material and concrete support and that nevertheless can be of great help because it responds to the fundamental need of man to feel in relationship with others and to be able to share their states of mind. concrete gestures, virtual gestures of love and closeness, words, must be the rule in this moment. We all need to feel listened to, loved, thought of by our affections, I think this reassures a lot.

**In these days, the strongest blow is mainly suffered by nurses, doctors and all the medical staff engaged on the front line in Italian hospitals to contain the health emergency, what psychological effects could develop?** Allow me two considerations. For several years I have worked with my colleague psychotherapist Raffaella Girelli in a neonatal intensive care unit, a part of our work was precisely addressed to healthcare personnel. From that experience I have learned a lot: especially that in intensive units you need to invest and "in abundance". I have experienced first-hand the suffering generated by working in critical conditions, you cannot think that to a doctor or a nurse who does a double shift (for lack of staff) and works in an intensive care unit is not recognized a gratification in economic terms and free time.

Secondly, I believe that we will have to think about how to take care of the healthcare personnel who is living in the trenches at this time and never stops. I believe that we will have to deal with many cases of post-traumatic stress disorder and that there will be the need to organize support and rehabilitation courses. In addition to the medical treatment, medical personnel find themselves managing the terminal moments of those patients who unfortunately do not make it, with the aggravating circumstance - being in intensive care – that they are deprived of the proximity of their loved ones. This must not be forgotten.

(In the photo, Francesca N. Vasta is individual and group psychotherapist, contract professor at the Catholic University of Rome, Teacher and supervisor of the Graduate School of Psychotherapy COIRAG, Trainer for public and private entities)

**We also need to think about the isolation of the positives. The telephone calls to the sick: what can be said to them to alleviate the exhausting burden of emotional fatigue, even here, without transmitting our fears?**

Even in this case it is not possible to provide a recipe for the "efficacious call". Each situation is different as well as the relative-sick bond in question. In my own experience, I have seen give relief to the relative of the terminally ill patient to feature the possibility of expressing their feelings of affection and of transmitting the value of the bond lived together up to now with the loved one. There is a poignant poem by Borges that expresses what I mean "You don't know if life is a journey, if it is a dream, if it is expected, if it is a plan that takes place day after day and you do not realize it if you do not look backwards. You don't know if it makes sense. In certain moments the meaning doesn't count. It is the bonds that count. "

**How has your work as psychologists changed, if it has changed, in this very particular moment?**

First of all, as I mentioned earlier, the National Council of the Board of Psychologists has put at the disposal of the citizens a brief handbook that can be found online. Many colleagues have expressed their useful opinion on the pages of many newspapers or have been interviewed by online sharing platforms. There is a sector of psychology called emergency psychology that can do a lot at the moment. What frightens me the most is that

all **psychologists or psychotherapists who do not have a specific preparation** regarding what is happening can, with the best of intentions, improvise as emergency or group psychologists, which is a very dangerous thing. I say this relatively above all to groups, to companies. We must bear in mind that, at this time, in many firms, companies, open spaces, associated studios and all other categories that work in a group, if there has been a member of the working group that has developed the virus, this event has triggered a whole range of fears. Even in this area, I believe that psychologists will be called upon to intervene, but with the necessary specific skills.

At the level of **individual psychotherapy**, I can say that many things have changed, first of all the context of our intervention. From professional studios we have switched to online therapies. I was surprised by the patients' profound ability to adapt to this situation. Needless to say, in 99% of the sessions, a time space is dedicated to talking about what they are experiencing. I would add that in the professional community to which I belong there is a great desire for an exchange of views to encourage the creation of a common thought regarding the current online psychotherapeutic practice.

**When this period ends, will we find ourselves different? How much do events of this kind change you 'inside', individually and collectively?**

Now the only thing we have to think about is not about the future but about how to **live our daily life**, about the fact that we have to pass through this situation not knowing for how long it will last and it is useless to project ourselves into a future still unknown. I certainly hope that we will rediscover ourselves different, I hope that all of this will teach a lot on multiple levels. **Politically**, for example, that cuts in healthcare must not and cannot be made or not to invest in civic education and socio-emotional school education. For those of us, who will have to choose the political class of tomorrow, thinking about how much it is essential to have stable reference figures who are also prepared to manage emergency situations at this moment or in similar moments: Statesmen (with a capital "S") who know how to put aside political forums in situations like these to unite in a chorus without party labels but ready to commit for the good of the country. **On an anthropological level**, thinking of replacement rituals, let's remember that in this moment nobody can celebrate a wedding, any other ceremony, a funeral. All this should be deepened in a delicate speech that we do not have time to do now. **On an individual level**, the common experience will result in a heritage for each one of us, what we will put in our heritage will only depend on our ability to learn from the experience. **At the group level**, I would like to underline, as a person and as a group psychotherapist, here too a wish that enhances our sense of community and the value of our welfare which - it must be remembered - makes us all more united and more similar in this moment. We hope that the civic sense will also be strengthened regarding the fulfilment of our duties as citizens.

Just today I was reading that in the large US metropolises right now there is a queue not only in supermarkets but in armouries. Why buy a weapon in this moment? The possibility of buying weapons in a pandemic situation is a further serious risk to the safety of the population of a distant Coronaville.

***Do you want to add something?***

Yes, I would like to invite all readers to read the hummingbird story that will help us dream and instil the hope that we can all make the difference.

*A large fire broke out in the forest one day. In front of the flames, all the animals ran away terrified as the fire destroyed everything without mercy.*

*Lions, zebras, elephants, rhinos, gazelles and many other animals sought shelter in the waters of the great river, but now the fire was arriving there too.*

*While everyone was arguing animatedly on what to do, a very small hummingbird dived into the waters of the river and, after taking a drop of water in its beak, regardless of the great heat, dropped it over the smoke-filled forest. The fire didn't even notice it and continued its run pushed by the wind.*

*The hummingbird, however, did not lose heart and continued to dive to collect each time a small drop of water which would fall on the flames.*

*The fact did not go unnoticed and at a certain point the lion called him and asked him: "What are you doing?". The bird replied, "I'm trying to put out the fire!"*

*The lion started to laugh: "You are so small and you pretend to stop the flames?" and together with all the other animals he began to make fun of him. But the bird, regardless of laughter and criticism, threw himself back into the river to collect another drop of water.*

*At that sight a baby elephant, which until then had remained sheltered between the mother's paws, immersed its trunk in the river and, after having sucked as much water as possible, sprayed it on a bush that was now about to be devoured by the fire. Even a young pelican, leaving his parents in the middle of the river, filled his large beak with water and, taking flight, dropped it like a waterfall on a tree threatened by flames.*

*Contaminated by those examples, all the animal puppies started to put out the fire that had now reached the banks of the river. Forgetting old grudges and millennial divisions, the cub of the lion and the antelope, that of the monkey and the leopard, that of the white-necked eagle and the hare fought side by side to stop the fire race.*

*At that sight the adults stopped deriding them and, full of shame, they began to give support to their children. With the arrival of fresh forces, well organized by the lion king, when the evening shadows fell on the savannah, the fire could now be said to have ended.*

*Dirty and tired, but safe, all the animals gathered to celebrate victory over the fire together.*

*The lion called the little hummingbird and said to him: "Today we have learned that the most important thing is not to be big and strong but full of courage and generosity. Today you have taught us that even a drop of water can be important and that "Together we can" put out a big fire. From now on you will become the symbol of our commitment to build a better world, where there will be room for everyone, violence will be banned, the word war erased, death and hunger just a bad memory. "*

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Read the original article in Italian here: <https://www.today.it/attualita/coronavirus-intervista-psicoterapeuta-francesca-vasta.html?fbclid=IwAR0dTjQqunUSglJcgWNYfgd-48yXGAQs1V1tAgyQDpg8Im0ivrGdY3QQUi8>.